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ABSTRACT

A Parent Education Program was initiated in Chicago in fall 1981 to promote parental interest and involvement in their own and their children's education. The program's rationale, which is supported by studies of parent behavior and child development, is that involved parents will have a positive impact on their children's educational and personal achievements and self-concept. Whereas most parent education programs are home based and involve the parents of infants or very young children, this program is directed mainly at the educational skills of the mothers of school-age children and is based in the children's elementary school or a nearby Chicago Youth Center. The Parent Education Program was evaluated in spring 1982 to determine its effects on the parents and children involved and areas for improvement. Interviews were conducted with eight parents, who were all single, unemployed, black women; eight of their children; and their children's teachers. The interviews revealed that the mothers took courses in hopes of completing requirements for a high school diploma or to improve job opportunities, and that they felt the courses enhanced their ability to be involved in their children's education. The children expressed interest in school and felt both they and their mothers had benefited from the program. Teachers commented upon the mothers' interest in their children's education and noted that the children were very good students, both academically and socially. (LL)

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The Chicago District Ten Parent Education Program

Crystal J. Crocheron, Josephine Perry, and John Q. Easton[1]

Chicago's westside Lawndale neighborhood is characterized by high unemployment rates and other symptoms of urban decay. Achievement levels in the elementary schools follow a typical pattern of children falling further behind national averages every year they are in school. The parents of many elementary school children are themselves recent high school dropouts -- lacking essential basic literacy skills and unprepared for employment.

The City Colleges of Chicago, through the Center for the Improvement of Teaching and Learning, coordinates a pilot parent program with the Chicago Board of Education in the westside Lawndale area for parents of students from a cluster of four elementary schools. We offer courses that range from adult education basic skills classes to typing, in addition to courses designed to help parents assist their children with school work.

Many studies of parental behavior and child development support the proposition that certain stable parental behavior patterns directly influence the intellectual and linguistic development of the child (for example, Brim, 1965; Falendar & Heber, 1975; Levenstein, 1968, 1970, 1977; Ramey et al., 1975, 1976, 1979). Parent education programs based on the findings of this research (for example, Chilman, 1973; Hess et al., 1971; Karnes, 1968) have become a popular means of enhancing parental effectiveness in facilitating optimal development of the child. Typically, the goal of these programs is to use the parent to improve

[1]The first two authors conducted this evaluation study and the third author was involved in the planning of the program and in writing this paper.

children's cognitive functioning or their motivation. Usually parents are trained by a tutor or teacher who acts as a model and as a source of encouragement for parents to become involved in their children's intellectual development. The belief that low income parents have not had the same opportunities to develop the effective parenting skills that middle class parents have had is basic to these parent education programs. The social and political implications of programs that aim to teach adults (especially women) how to be better parents (see Schlossman, 1979, for example) are important for a clear understanding of parent education programs. These programs have typically placed the burden of success or failure on parents, rather than on social and political inequalities.

Many parent education programs have succeeded in raising children's cognitive levels. Gordon (1969) found that teaching effective parental skills to disadvantaged mothers of 124 infants and young children both increased the mothers' competence and sense of personal worth, and enhanced the development of the children. In weekly home visits, parent educators taught a series of exercises that stimulated children's perceptual, motor, and verbal activities. Results showed that children whose mothers had been involved in the project were superior to control children on both the Griffiths Mental Development Scales and in the materials designed as teaching materials for the project. Moreover, mothers for whom there were both pre- and post- information moved toward a more internal control of reinforcement orientation. They felt they had more control and influence over their own lives and their child's development than they did when they first entered the project.

Levenstein (1977) found similar results in her mother-child home care program. This program emphasized the importance of fostering a positive emotional relationship between mothers and their children. The program was

designed to facilitate children's intellectual, verbal, and psychological development. The basic program consisted of 46 semiweekly visits by "toy demonstrators" in each of two calendar years, starting when the children were two years old and continuing until they were four. The toy demonstrators showed the mothers how to stimulate their children's cognitive and linguistic growth through the use of carefully selected age appropriate play materials and books. Once mothers began to interact comfortably with their child, the toy demonstrator faded into the background. Levenstein found that children made substantial gains in their intellectual and linguistic performance, which were maintained even after several years following the end of the program.

While most parent education programs are home based and involve infants or very young children, the program discussed in this paper differs from these in several important aspects. In the first place, the curriculum in this program is directed mainly at the mothers' own educational skills with only secondary emphasis on parenting skills (for example, helping children with homework). Secondly, the children in this program range in age from kindergarten to the upper elementary grades. Finally, this program is based in the children's home elementary school rather than in the home.

The major purpose of this program is to provoke parental interest and involvement in both their own and their children's education. The underlying rationale for the program is that committed and involved parents will act as positive role models to their children, and will thereby have a positive effect on their children's educational and personal achievements, attitudes, and self-concept.

The planning for this program began in the fall of 1980 with a series of meetings between Chicago Board of Education and City Colleges adminis-

trators who were interested in combining forces to develop a program that could help educational problems of children and adults simultaneously. Our strategy was to survey the Lawndale neighborhood in Chicago to determine interest and response to an education program located in local elementary schools designed for parents. We sent about 2,500 questionnaires home with students enrolled in four elementary schools. The questionnaire asked parents what specific course they would take, at what times, and in what locations. More than 800 parents returned the questionnaires indicating that they were interested in the program.

Based on the results of this survey, classes opened in the fall of 1981 in two of the elementary schools and in a nearby Chicago Youth Center. The Youth Center offers evening classes, is donated to us rent free, and provides personal security for students as well as storage for equipment. All of the classes in the elementary schools are scheduled for daytime, either during or immediately after school hours.

Seven sections of four different classes opened in late September, 1981, for approximately 125 parents. The four classes were General Educational Development (GED--in preparation for the high school equivalency examination), Typing, Business Grammar, Improving Study Skills, and Child Development. All subsequent class offerings have included both the GED and typing classes, along with additional classes including adult basic skills in reading and math designed to complement the GED classes. The courses for helping children with their school work have changed regularly to meet the needs and interests of the parents enrolled.

All instructors in this program are interviewed and selected by a committee composed of representatives of the Chicago Board of Education, the City Colleges of Chicago, and the Chicago Youth Centers. The GED teachers are from the Chicago Urban Skills Institute (a division of the

City Colleges); the typing classes are taught by training specialists from the Adult Continuing Education department of the City Colleges; and the child development classes and other classes for assisting children with their school work have been taught by teachers from the two involved elementary schools. All of the teachers are paid by the City Colleges of Chicago.

The Parent Education Program was evaluated in the early spring of 1982 in order to determine if the program was having a positive effect on the parents and the children involved and also to see what steps could be taken to improve the program. Center staff members interviewed eight parents, their children, and their children's teachers. The interview process and the results are described in the remainder of this paper.

Method

Sample Selection

The sample consisted of a total of 24 respondents: eight parents, eight children, and eight teachers. The parents were all students in the Parent Education Program for at least one eight week session and attended 60% or more of the classes. Half of these parents had children enrolled in one of the elementary schools involved in this program, and the other half had children in the second elementary school. Each of the eight parents gave permission to have one of her children interviewed, as well as that child's school teacher.

Description of Sample

All eight of the parents were single, unemployed black women, with an average age of 33. Although only three of the eight had completed high school, half had some experiences with college level courses.

The ages of the eight children ranged from five to thirteen, with an average age of eight. All of the children but one were on grade level.

The teachers were an experienced group, with each having at least ten years of teaching experience.

Procedure

Each interview schedule contained five topic questions, plus a set of probes and alternative questions. For the most part, the questions were general and open-ended. Parent questions inquired about reasons for enrolling in the program, benefits of the program, and the extent to which they were involved in their children's education. The children questions inquired into feelings about school, knowledge of their parents' attending school, and what they had learned since their parents began classes in the program. The teacher questions were concerned with the children's academic and social progress, and the degree to which teachers perceived these children's parents as being involved in the children's school work.

The interviews were conducted over a two-week period in the elementary schools involved in this project by two trained interviewers. The average length of each interview was about eight minutes; the parent interviews tended to be longer while the teacher interviews were shorter.

Results

Mothers

The majority of the mothers decided to take the courses in the Parent Education Program in the hopes of completing the requirements for obtaining a high school or equivalency diploma, and subsequently for seeking job opportunities. More importantly, however, the mothers expressed a need to become involved in their children's education, and felt that the courses

they were taking allowed them to understand what their children were doing in school and ways in which they might be able to help them with homework and other academic problems. Thus, the mothers felt that the program was very beneficial in enhancing mother-child relationships and interactions, by providing them with a basis for talking with their children about common educational problems and interests. Mothers also reported that they spent more time helping their children with their homework since they began attending classes; they felt, in general, that the program made them more competent to help their children on a one-to-one basis and provide an atmosphere of encouragement and discipline. Indeed mothers reported that, oftentimes, their child would come to them with problems with the feeling that they knew the answers and would ideally be able to help them solve difficult tasks. This, in turn, appears to have increased the mothers' self-esteem and respect, for they often said they were proud of themselves for being involved in the program and being able to help their children. In general, mothers felt the program was a success but should be extended to include more subject areas.

Children

The children expressed a keen interest in school, saying that they liked to read books and talk with the other children in their classes. When questioned about their mothers going to school, they were unable to give specific reasons but felt that their mothers enjoyed school and liked to learn. The older children, however, did report that their mothers took classes to obtain their diploma and to continue their education. The children indicated also that mothers spent much time with them in completing homework. Much of this time was spent not only with the mother helping the children with problems; but also with the older children helping their mothers, often creating a cooperative atmosphere where both mother and

children learned from each other. The children mentioned having a lot of pride in their mothers, saying that their mothers were smart, helpful, and were improving themselves by taking classes. Indeed, one child who was competing in the Academic Olympics (oratory) said that most parents would be ashamed to be in school while their children were there and that his mother made him proud of her by returning to school and encouraging him to do his best. In general, therefore, the children felt that, not only were their mothers gaining valuable experience from the Parent-Child Project, but they also were gaining because of their mothers' interest and help in their education.

Teachers

The teachers were generally unaware until recently that the children's mothers were involved in the Parent Education Program. They, however, did report that the mothers demonstrated an interest in their children's education by coming to school and talking to them about their children's progress. Teachers also indicated that the children were very good students, both academically and socially; they were well-mannered, were motivated, demonstrated interest in school, and had very good attendance. While some children never mentioned to teachers obtaining any help with their homework from their mothers, others told their teachers that their mothers were very helpful with the homework because they were often studying similar things. Here also, some comments indicated that the child was also helpful to the mother and that this created an atmosphere conducive to mutual mother-child learning. In general, teachers indicated that the children were progressing satisfactorily, with a minimum of academic or social problems.

Discussion

In general, the parent-child education project was successful in promoting an atmosphere of optimal learning for both mother and child.

Mothers appeared to have an enhanced self-concept and respect for themselves, primarily because they felt that, by taking classes, they were more knowledgeable and competent to help their children. This, in turn, increased their participation and interaction with their children academically and socially, creating an atmosphere of mutual interest and respect. Mothers' participation in school also seemed to enhance their children's self-concept, for they often mentioned that they felt they were able to help their mothers with some of their work, and that they learned much from doing this. The mothers also felt that encouraging their children to succeed in school was extremely important, and that they had become more aware of this by becoming involved in school themselves. This general attitude of encouragement is concretely reflected in the children's progress in school, as shown by the teachers' reports of the children's academic and social participation. Thus, the program appeared to have a positive effect for the mothers and their children by providing a setting in which both can teach and learn from each other.

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